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SUBJECT: Turks in Germany Press Issue of Turkey's EU Membership

REF: MUNICH 0380

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Turkish community in Germany voiced their frustration with opponents of Turkey's EU membership at a high-profile May 25 debate in Frankfurt in which the four major German parties sought to win the Turkish community's support in the June 13 European and local elections. At the event (hosted by a leading Turkish organization), the Social Democrats (SPD) continued to advocate Turkey's entry into the EU (with the Free Democrats and Green Party also showing putative support) while the conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) remained firm in their rejection of opening accession negotiations. Audience members (largely business representatives) cautioned that the Turkish government has taken great strides to fulfill EU requirements and that the political mood in Turkey could quickly sour if the EU resets the goalpost. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) A consulate representative attended a campaign debate organized by the "Rat der Tuerkeistaemmigen Staatsbuerger in Deutschland" (Council of Turkish-born citizens in Germany, an umbrella organization of 15 Turkish associations), at which representatives of the four largest German parties discussed Turkey's EU accession bid and related issues. The following candidates took the stage:  
-- Michael Gahler, CDU MEP (Hattersheim near Frankfurt)  
-- Ozan Ceyhun, Turkish-born SPD MEP (Ruesselsheim -- near Frankfurt)  
-- Heide Ruehle, Green MEP from Boeblingen (Baden-Wuerttemberg)  
-- Kerstin Laabs, Free Democrat (FDP) European Parliament candidate (Darmstadt).

3. (SBU) Gahler said that although the CDU would continue to speak out against Turkey's membership in the EU, it would not make the issue a centerpiece of its campaign (e.g., no anti-membership billboards or television advertisements). He reiterated his party's call for a "privileged partnership" (including an expanded custom union and closer cooperation on security issues -- see reftel) in lieu of full EU membership for Turkey. Gahler listed several reasons for the CDU's opposition to opening accession negotiations in the near future, including the EU's need to integrate its ten new members, Turkey's record on human rights (e.g., the imprisonment of Kurdish activist Leila Zana), and the possibility that early EU membership could overwhelm Turkey and generate backlash among Turks in Turkey against further European integration.

4. (SBU) The Turkish audience expressed its disappointment with the CDU's stance and speculated that a "closed door" policy could alienate and radicalize Turks across Europe and in Turkey itself. Several participants cited Turkey's far-reaching reforms and its 60 billion euro investment in the EU-Turkey custom union as proof that Turkey could make the necessary changes for EU membership within ten years -- the length of time most observers expect accession negotiations would last.

5. (SBU) The SPD's Ozan Ceyhun (the only German MEP with a Turkish background) blamed the CDU for creating the impression that Germans are voting on Turkey's EU membership in the upcoming European elections. Ceyhun dubbed the CDU's "privileged partnership" a "trick to keep Turkey out." He emphasized that negotiations with Turkey had to be accelerated to curb growing frustration and to make Turkey a role model for the rest of the Muslim world. Participants expressed strong support for Ceyhun, but some criticized Interior Minister (and SPD member) Otto Schily's hard-line stance on German immigration as well as a recent comment attributed to (and denied by) Turkish-born SPD candidate Vugul Oeger that "Turkish women will accomplish today what Turkey could not 400 years ago" (i.e., a high birth rate will allow today's Turks to "conquer" Europe, something that the Ottomans failed to do in the 17th century).

6. (SBU) Greens representative Heide Ruehle delivered the most well-received statement in favor of Turkey's EU membership. Because of CDU "demagoguery", she said, 80 percent of the German population wrongly thinks negotiations on EU membership will start soon after the elections, when in fact all that will be decided this year is whether or not

to open negotiations -- and, if so, when. (Comment: Her point is a bit disingenuous, given that the EU pledged in December 2002 that a positive decision on opening negotiations would be followed by the start of talks "without delay" -- most likely in the first half of 2005. End Comment.) She called the privileged partnership "something we already have" and noted that, from a security standpoint, delaying negotiations could destabilize Turkey. Turning to Turkey's responsibilities, Ruehle called upon the Turkish government to strengthen reforms in agriculture, education, and the fight against corruption.

17. (SBU) FDP representative Kerstin Laabs noted that Turkey had made significant progress in fulfilling the EU's membership criteria. He stressed the cultural importance of Turkey's accession to the EU, saying that Turkey's membership could be a role model for peaceful cooperation between Christians and Muslims.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Although three of Germany's four major parties support EU membership for Turkey, audience reaction at the conference centered on the CDU's continued resistance. Most participants portrayed the CDU's reasons for opposition as pretexts for a party that still does not believe that Turkey is really part of Europe. Germany's Turkish community worries that the CDU's rising national popularity and continuing difficulties for the SPD could mean a change of government following Germany's 2006 national elections and a resulting loss of German support for Turkish EU membership. While nothing new was said at the convention, the audience's pointed commentary highlights a Turkish community in Germany increasingly anxious about Turkey's future within the EU. END COMMENT.

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